

# BLACK STUDIES MOVEMENT:

## A Plea for Perspective

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By Martin Kilson

**W**E are now in the era of fashionable movements, and the black studies movement is one of them. Advocates of fashionable movements are inclined to act as if what they have latched onto with such fervor was never recognized as worthy or important until they came along. This kind of indifference to and ignorance of the fact that one's movement had precursors is useful to the advocates of the black studies movement: it gives them security in their belief in their own self-importance. And there is no doubt that the advocates of the black studies movement feel important about what they think is *their* discovery.

But the fact is that they have not really discovered anything at all: they are simply newcomers to an issue of long standing. The advocates of black studies or Afro-American studies stand squarely on the shoulders of other men—black and white—who have long been concerned with systematic and honest study of the Negro in American

history and society. These were all men—and some are still alive—of superior intellectual caliber and scholarly capacity. They were also modest and sensitive human beings, who were not given to blowing their own horn.

Pre-eminent among the Negroes who were the true founders of Afro-American studies was the late Professor Carter G. Woodson, who completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago and his doctorate in history at Harvard University. In addition to contributing scholarly and popular books on Negro history, Prof. Woodson helped found the pioneering Association for the Study of Negro Life and History around World War I and conceived and edited the Association's organ, *The Journal of Negro History*.

Any adequate listing of other black pioneers in the field of Afro-American studies would surely include the following men: E. Franklin Frazier, a sociologist trained at the University of Chicago and whose social history of the Negro entitled *The Negro in the United States* (1948) is still the best book of its kind; W. E. B. Du Bois, a Harvard-trained historian and sociologist who, in addition to helping found the NAACP, wrote *The Negro in Philadelphia* (1899) which is a classic in the field of urban sociology; St. Clair Drake, a Uni-

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versity of Chicago-trained sociologist whose book *Black Metropolis* (1948), of which Horace Cayton is co-author, is another landmark in urban sociology; Horace Mann Bond, one of my teachers at Lincoln University and himself a University of Chicago-trained sociologist, whose book *The Education of the Negro in Alabama—A Study in Cotton and Steel* (1937) is a classic in the sociology of education; Rayford Logan, a Harvard-trained historian who succeeded Prof. Woodson as editor of *The Journal of Negro History* and whose book *The Negro in American Life and Thought—The Nadir, 1877-1901* is a pioneering contribution in the study of white racism in America; Allison Davis, a University of Chicago-trained social psychologist whose book *Deep South* (1941) is a classic in the sociology of white racism; and last, but not least, John Hope Franklin, a Harvard-trained historian and chairman of the Department of History at the University of Chicago.

These black pioneers in the field of Afro-American studies are important not simply because of the books they wrote. They are important, too, because they brought to their study of the Negro that special and rare quality of self-detachment, the significance of which seems lost to so many of today's advocates of the black studies movement.

THE late Professor Kelly Miller, the Negro sociologist at Howard University in the 1920's, saw the quality of self-detachment as one of the most enduring attributes of the scholarly contributions of Prof.

Carter G. Woodson. In an address in 1926 commending Prof. Woodson's role in the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Kelly Miller remarked that:

The largest measure of our admiration is due to the Negro (scholar) who can divest himself of momentary passion and prejudice and with *self-detachment* devote his powers to searching out and sifting the historical facts growing out of race relationship.

I think Prof. Kelly Miller's remark about Prof. Woodson represents a fine definition of what anyone seriously concerned with Afro-American studies should be attempting to do. Unfortunately, however, there are many people concerned today with the black studies movement who would disagree with this. Although some of the advocates of the black studies movement have university training and degrees, they have little patience with the concept of self-detachment as applied by great scholars like Carter G. Woodson, Horace Mann Bond, John Hope Franklin, and others in their study of the black man in this country.

Instead, many advocates of the black studies movement prefer that the study of the Negro in colleges be organized in terms of one's prejudices and that what one produces as scholarship display these prejudices—unqualified by reason and the subtle and special habits of the scholar. Indeed, they go further and demand that Afro-American studies serve explicit ideological ends—namely, to demonstrate to black men that everything black is beautiful, has always been beauti-

ful, and presumably will always be beautiful. Such advocates believe that by requiring colleges—and especially white colleges—to adopt an ideological approach to Afro-American studies, the vulgarities of white racist portrayal of the Negro will be redressed. In this way, they believe the Negro will be made free of feelings of inferiority and cultural insecurity. He will henceforth stand tall in the knowledge (or what I prefer to call pseudo-knowledge) that everything black men have done is glorious and noble, and all that white men have done is evil and ignominious.

Now I will defer to no militant—black or white—in wanting to rid the scholarly treatment of the Negro of white racist evaluations. Far too few black and white American scholars and educational institutions have been concerned with this in the past, and it is time that this concern be given special attention or priority in American colleges and universities. To this extent, I welcome the activity of Negro students on campuses across the country in behalf of Afro-American studies—though I disagree with some of their tactics and methods.

But I am opposed to proposals to make Afro-American studies into a platform for a particular ideological group, and to restrict these studies to Negro students and teachers. For, and we must be frank about this, what this amounts to is racism in reverse—black racism. I am certainly convinced that it is important for the Negro to know more of his past—of his ancestors, of their strengths and their weaknesses—and they should respect

this knowledge, when it warrants respect, and they should question it and criticize it, when it deserves criticism. But it is of no advantage to a mature and critical understanding or appreciation of one's heritage if you approach that heritage with the assumption that it is intrinsically good or noble, and intrinsically superior to the heritage of other peoples. This is, after all, precisely what white racists have done; and none of my militant friends in the black studies movement has convinced me that racist thought is any less vulgar and degenerate simply because it is used by black men.

Furthermore, many advocates of the black studies movement believe—or pretend to believe—that Afro-American studies programs cannot help but engender aggressive racial pride among Negro students. I don't believe this for one minute. Certainly a Negro student who learns about the great sculpture of West African peoples or the historical chronicles written by black Africans in Arabic in the medieval period will be proud of these achievements, in the same way that an Anglo-American student is proud of William Shakespeare. But would this same Negro student, say at Harvard, who learns in a course on African History of the voluntary role of black Africans in organizing and perpetuating the slave trade in the 16th to 19th centuries be proud of this activity? Or would the same Anglo-American student who learns in a course on British History of the vicious oppression and violence by the English against the Irish during the period of British occu-

pation of Ireland be proud of this activity?

What I am suggesting here is that the serious study of the heritage of any people will produce a curious mixture of things to be proud of, things to criticize and even despise and things to be perpetually ambivalent toward. And this is as it should be: only an ideologically oriented Afro-American studies program, seeking to propagate a packaged view of the black heritage, would fail to evoke in a student the curious yet fascinating mixture of pride, criticism, and ambivalence which I think is, or ought to be, the product of serious intellectual and academic activity.

**I**T seems to me that many advocates of the black studies movement are equally mistaken in their understanding of how programs in Afro-American studies should be academically organized. Some want these programs to train ideological cadres who, after several years in such a program, go out and spread the black nationalist gospel throughout the urban black community. Quite frankly I don't believe it is the proper or most useful function for a university to train ideological or political organizers of whatever persuasion. A university's primary function is to impart skills, techniques, and special habits of learning to its students. The student must be free to decide himself on the ideological application of his training. It would be a disservice to American higher education if the black studies movement becomes responsible for forcing colleges and

universities into fixed ideological positions in teaching the humanities and the social sciences.

In opposition to the ideological organization of Afro-American studies, I would suggest that these studies be organized in a manner similar to that of other disciplines taught at a first-class liberal arts college. The field of Afro-American studies is an interdisciplinary one of the first order; no student could possibly master in several years all the disciplines that touch on Afro-American studies like literature, history, philosophy, economics, anthropology, sociology, and political science. I would strongly question the value of any Afro-American studies program organized in a manner that would allow a student to dabble in all of these different disciplines, but master none of them. And there are, unfortunately, such programs being organized in our colleges.

But I am concerned that a student, black or white, trained in this kind of Afro-American studies program will be a dilettante—pure and simple. Although the advocates of the black studies movement do not appear aware of it, college-trained dilettantes in any field of learning are low on the list for admission to top-rank graduate schools, and are certainly low on the list for employment. *It is therefore imperative to ward against dilettantism in the academic organization of Afro-American studies. This can be achieved most effectively by requiring students who major in Afro-American studies to fulfill a good part of the academic requirements in an established discipline like economics, while simultaneously pursu-*

ing specialized courses in Afro-American studies. In this way, a student in Afro-American studies will gain proficiency in a discipline that has concrete application; and if the student wishes he can apply the mathematical and analytical skills in a field like economics to the special economic issues facing black men.

It is, after all, a simple and incontrovertible fact that the best black economists today, like Prof. Arthur Lewis at Princeton University, Prof. Thomas Sowell at Cornell University, or Dr. Pius Okigbo, the Nigerian economist, were not trained in the kind of dilettantish Afro-American studies programs demanded by many advocates of the black studies movement. These fine black economists were trained in first-class economic departments at the University of London, Harvard University, the University of Chicago, and Northwestern University. They first of all learned the complex skills of economic analysis before they began to apply these skills to the economic problems confronting black men in America or Africa. *Nothing less than this should be required of any student, black or white—but especially any Negro student—who would want to major in an Afro-American studies program. Indeed, anything less than this will be a colossal waste of time and resources.* And it will be as well of little value to the difficult problem of advancing the position of Negroes in American life.

FINALLY, I would like to register my doubts about the value of the majority of Negro students in

white colleges majoring in Afro-American studies. Some 65 per cent of all blacks now in college are attending white institutions like Wayne State University, the City College of New York, University of California, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton universities, and the opportunity now available to blacks to major in the sciences and technical fields like engineering should not be lost because of the ideological and psychological attraction of Afro-American studies. As Prof. Arthur Lewis of Princeton University brilliantly pointed out in an article in *The New York Times Magazine* recently, *the road to the top and middle occupations in American society is through the sciences and the technical fields—not through Afro-American studies.*

This point has special application to the many thousands of Negro students who will become school teachers—especially high school teachers. High schools attended by the overwhelming majority of Negro children are in need of teachers well-trained in mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics. Negro teachers in these fields are much rarer than teachers in social studies, history, and literature. These latter fields are closely related to Afro-American studies, and though there is certainly a serious need for Negro teachers of social studies or history to be trained in Afro-American studies, I do not believe that the majority of Negro teachers should opt for training in Afro-American studies to the neglect of mathematics, chemistry, physics, and biology. *The long-run contribution of Negro teachers trained in Afro-American*

*studies to the occupational advancement of black high school students is just too insignificant. As Bayard Rustin remarked recently, there is simply not much room in the American economy for black experts in soul music, and literature, and soul history.*

Thus, although I believe strongly that Negro students should learn about the black heritage, I believe just as strongly that there is a right way to do this. An Afro-American studies program should be free of explicit ideological tendencies of a political nature. A university's function is to impart skills and techniques, not ideology. Simply because some colleges have imparted explicit ideologies—like some in the State of Mississippi—this is no defense in my book for an ideologically oriented Afro-American studies program. Furthermore, Afro-American studies should be aca-

demically organized to guarantee that students—black and white—obtain proficiency in an established discipline like sociology or economics, at the same time that they gain special skills in Afro-American studies.

Any Afro-American studies program organized along all-black lines is of dubious value. Efforts to do this at some institutions, like Antioch College, are short-sighted, a disservice to American education, and morally at bay. Finally, the way to the top and middle jobs in American society is through professional education, and especially in the sciences and technical fields. Efforts by many advocates of the black studies movement to portray Afro-American studies as the educational salvation of black men display a deficiency of thought and common sense.

*Mrs. Ida B. Wells, of Los Angeles, was an active 106 years of age on July 26 of this year. A continuous supporter of the NAACP, "Mother" Wells also was one of the founders of the Simmon's Chapel AME Zion Church in Lisbon, Ohio. In 1967, the City of Los Angeles adopted a resolution honoring the centenarian on her 104th birthday.*

